

Politics

A public probe of foreign election interference should also look at India, Sikh organizations say

Spokesperson for Sikh group says Ottawa tends to avoid confrontations with India

Catharine Tunney · CBC News · Posted: Mar 21, 2023 4:00 AM EDT | Last Updated: March 21, 2023



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi wave during a family photo at the G7 Summit in Schloss Elmau on Monday, June 27, 2022. (Paul Chiasson/Canadian Press)

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As former governor general David Johnston considers whether to recommend a public inquiry into Chinese government election meddling, two Sikh organizations say India's interference in Canadian politics also demands scrutiny.

"We don't feel like we as a nation, as a country, have even acknowledged India as a problem in that form," said Moninder Singh, acting spokesperson for the British Columbia Gurdwaras Council, which advocates for the political concerns of Sikhs in Canada.

"People, I think, in our government feel compelled to bend to a certain degree, to not piss India off."

Opposition parties have been calling on the federal government to announce a public inquiry into foreign election interference in response to Globe and Mail reports that say the Chinese Communist Party attempted to ensure the Liberal Party won a minority government in the 2021 election.

Reporting by Global alleges intelligence officials warned Prime Minister Justin Trudeau that the Chinese government's interference campaign included funding a "clandestine network of at least 11 federal candidates running in the 2019 election" — an allegation Trudeau has denied.

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Last week, the government appointed Johnston to the role of "special rapporteur" investigating the accusations and said he could recommend a public inquiry.

The British Columbia Gurdwaras Council teamed up with the Ontario Gurdwaras Committee to publish a report Monday calling out alleged Indian interference in Canada's politics.

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"These activities include infiltrating Sikh Gurdwaras, recruiting informants and agent provocateurs within the community, deceptively interjecting the Indian narratives into Canadian media reporting, and influencing Canadian diplomats, security officers and MPs," it reads.



Moninder Singh is a spokesperson for the British Columbia Gurdwaras Council, which advocates for the political concerns of Sikhs in Canada. (Tina Lovgreen/CBC)

"The ultimate goal of such operations has been to discredit Sikh support for the Khalistan movement in Canada."

The report urged the government to look at other countries' efforts to interfere in Canadian politics.

Singh said he wants a public inquiry to examine how India's intelligence sector uses consulates and embassies, and how they operate within diaspora communities.

"I think if it gets into the public domain, classifying India as a player on that, I think the first piece is acknowledging the problem. And only then can the problem be dealt with," he said.

Monday's report summarized multiple public reports and media stories over the years suggesting Canadian intelligence agencies have been aware of India's attempts to interfere in Canadian affairs.

NSICOP's report into India highly redacted

A 2018 report by the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (NSICOP) looked at tensions between Canada and India and made six findings regarding foreign interference — all of which were redacted from the public report.

The committee, made up of MPs and senators from multiple parties with clearance to view classified information, reviewed Trudeau's infamous trip to India in 2018. The trip became mired in controversy when Jaspal Atwal — convicted of trying to assassinate an Indian cabinet minister in B.C. in 1986 — was invited to dine with Trudeau at a formal event hosted by the Canadian High Commissioner in Delhi.



Last week, the government appointed former governor general David Johnston to the role of "special rapporteur" to investigate claims of foreign election meddling and possibly recommend a public inquiry. (Sean Kilpatrick/Canadian Press)

Daniel Jean, the prime minister's national security and intelligence adviser at the time, told reporters on background that rogue political elements in India may have arranged Atwal's invitation to embarrass Trudeau and make him seem sympathetic to Sikh extremism.

"We came to the conclusion that there was a very high probability of an orchestrated disinformation campaign to tarnish Canada," he told a committee back in 2018.

NSICOP's report also found that RCMP admitted that they made a mistake when they failed to inform Trudeau's protective detail that Atwal was planning to join the PM during his visit.

Ahead of the 2019 election, CBC News reported that intelligence services were monitoring efforts by six countries — including India — to influence the election campaign. Sources said an integrated intelligence unit had been giving Canadian political parties bi-weekly briefings about foreign actors' activities in Canada.

The Canadian Press reported senior bureaucrats were warned that China and India likely would lean on their diaspora communities to advance their own agendas.

The British Columbia Gurdwaras Council and the Ontario Gurdwaras Committee are calling on the federal government to take a tougher approach on the foreign interference file — legally, through the Criminal Code and the Canada Elections Act, and diplomatically, by declaring diplomats persona non grata where the evidence warrants their ejection.

Their report also calls on national security agencies to disclose relevant information about India's record of election meddling and political interference in Canada.

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National Security Adviser Daniel Jean tells the Public Safety committee why he briefed the media about the Jaspal Atwal affair

"Declassified summaries of this information are imperative to educate the general public about the realities of foreign interference in Canada while ensuring the safety,

security and confidence of vulnerable ethnocultural groups like the Sikh community," says the report.

"Indian foreign interference not only impacts Sikhs as a racialized group by persuading governments to repress vulnerable communities, but it also emboldens Indian officials to continue interfering in foreign states with impunity while violating human rights in Punjab."

The Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS) would not say whether it has observed interference attempts by India.

"I can assure you that CSIS is committed to protecting Canada and Canadians from national security threats, including foreign interference and espionage," said spokesperson Eric Balsam.

"Foreign states target members of Canadian communities with harassment, manipulation or intimidation. When individuals in Canada are subjected to such tactics by foreign states seeking to gather support for or mute criticism of their policies, these activities constitute a threat to Canada's sovereignty and to the safety of Canadians."

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"We don't necessarily know what's going on in the intelligence community and we can't know in many ways," said Singh. "But at the same time, the constant non-recognition of this issue paints a different picture for us."

The High Commission of India did not respond to CBC's request for comment.

Trudeau's rocky relationship with Modi

Singh has been vocal in his support for an independent Khalistan, a separate homeland for Sikhs. He said Canada's reluctance to call out current and previous Indian governments might be tied to trade issues, given that India has one of the fastest-growing economies in the world.

"You can acknowledge China, you can acknowledge Russia. What is the issue [with] acknowledging India?" he said.

Trudeau's government has had a fraught relationship with the Indian government during his time in office. It has been accused of being soft on the Khalistan movement and of harbouring separatist ministers in his cabinet.

Back in 2019, an official in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government accused the Liberal leader of kowtowing to Sikh voters after a reference to Sikh extremism was removed from a terrorism threat report.

Capt. Amarinder Singh, then the chief minister of Punjab, called the move "a threat to Indian and global security."

A few years earlier, Amarinder Singh snubbed cabinet minister Harjit Sajjan and accused him of being a "Khalistani sympathizer."

"Canada supports one, united India and that we are unanimous as a government, as ministers, on this issue," Trudeau said at the time.

According to a briefing cited in the NSICOP report, CSIS believes "the threat from Sikh extremists in Canada peaked in the mid-1980s and declined thereafter."

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